

Comments on Derrida's Response to Lacan's Reading of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*

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When, during the recess, I was informed of this special issue, I asked my wife to find me a copy of *The Purloined Letter*. I was left holding the baby while she went 'in search of the text'. She returned with a volume of Poe's collected works. *The Purloined Letter* appeared in the contents but was absent from the text (I must add here, 'absent' not as a Derridean anterior presence, but as that which has never been in the volume). I was left with the signifier of *The Purloined Letter*, the title, without the signified. The volume in which the signified did presumably appear had been purloined. It then occurred to me that I could turn this absence to my advantage: in keeping with Derridean ideas of dissemination and the trace, I should neglect to read *The Purloined Letter*. If meaning never arrives at its destination, then to be true to Derrida's reading, I should not go near the text. And then I remembered that I worked in an English Department, and that I might be out of a job if I deliberately did not read the text concerning which I was to write a paper.

Before beginning with the topic, I must say something about the tone of what is to follow. Reading Lacan's tortuously complicated reading, then Derrida's long labyrinthine response, and then Barbara Johnson's response to a response to a response, I was not always properly serious. The whole debate seemed bizarre, hysterically funny at times, and not always to be taken seriously. But then those readers who are very familiar with Derridean 'analytical' behaviour will find nothing amiss if I get silly.

When describing Derrida's response to Lacan and *The Purloined Letter*, as well as pointing out some typically Derridean comments one might make concerning *The Purloined Letter*, one cannot speak simply of analysis or criticism. This implies an explanation, an uncovering, a making plain, an unearthing of the sense, or a staking out of the meaning. To speak of 'response' is more correct but very vague: it is playing safe, giving little away, playing the card (the letter) close to the chest. In elucidating what the Derridean activity is, one can speak of unifying manoeuvres (or 'little rhythms', following Virginia Woolf) – dance sequences, conceptual series, sleights of hand or whatever. By this I mean Derrida uses corresponding manoeuvres, or responds by way of corresponding manoeuvres, which means *The Purloined Letter* is ever echoed, almost there, an anterior presence, itself an elusive trace. There is the patterning of *The Purloined Letter*, 'almost evidence' or reminders of its typical behaviour patterns.

While discussing the 'language of analysis', I must point out that in both Lacan's and Derrida's readings, there can be no possibility of a clear language of analysis, an anchored point of view, a master-narrative or metalanguage beyond history or even beyond the confines of each man's utterance. Both

analyses are therefore curtailed, as much a veil as a transparency (onto the text), subject to analysis itself. Any 'opening process', splitting process (like hitting a diamond exactly on the flaw to split it cleanly, without fuss) or deconstructing process can be employed, in turn, on the employer, Lacan or Derrida. All one is left with, in the debate, is a series of vulnerable victors, watched watchers or controlled controllers.

Also, one can isolate many layers of knowledge in the intertextual continuum of *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan, Derrida and reader. One may speak of a perpetual 'trumping' of knowledge inside and outside the text.

1. King and police (state of ignorance).
2. The Queen and the Minister exist in a realm with a superior vantage point, or have superior knowledge: both hide something, unsuccessfully, but are aware of having been robbed.
3. The Minister and Dupin discover ways of stealing the significant object i.e. steal the show, the meaning, rob the text, trump the hand.
4. The narrator, of course, knows all this, and more than each individual character. The next in the series is Poe, who creates the narrator.
5. Lacan and Derrida then appear, whose texts are also read by De Beer and Ryan.
6. These in turn are 'read' by the reading audience – enjoyed, laughed at, rejected, undermined, and so on. Each level creates its own metanarrative, subject to the constraints outlined above.

The problem, or false problem, or created (invented) problem which becomes a locus or site, a mode of significant response which in turn sparks off new responses, arguments, clashes of ideology, is our old friendly binary opposition, signifier/signified. In short, is the letter a signifier or a signified? For Lacan, it remains a signifier (to those in the story, and to the readers), because it functions without having its meaning revealed. Therefore the story is an allegory of the signifier. For Derrida, Lacan is vulnerable in two ways. First, the lack of revealed meaning becomes the meaning (in the way absence is not the description that should replace presence) and, secondly, Lacan limits the meaning, by producing a single, reactive, fixed meaning.

But perhaps the issue is more complicated than this. The letter is a signifier in the sense that meaning is never revealed – it never offers up 'its hidden self' to the reader. But signification does occur, on two levels. Firstly, in the story, presumably the Queen, the Minister, Dupin (and who knows who else) *read* the letter. The purloined letter is read just as *The Purloined Letter* is read. Secondly, for the reader, who never knows its contents, the letter nevertheless plays the role of an object. Its contents are utterly irrelevant (and in this sense, its function as a signifier may be trivial, unimportant). Its object-status in the story is no different from the object-status of a desk (which may house a book a gun or whatever), in the same way that one can speak of a letter housing meaning. Lacan's 'allegory of the signifier', surprisingly, may be too literal. The letter is obviously a signified in the story or a significant object: an inscribed object or an object containing signifiers (presumed, but not known), but an object (or a unit of meaning) nonetheless.

Derrida might take the opportunity to say that meaning (or the signified) is here shown by Poe to point only to other signifiers. Lacan, for Derrida, despite insisting that *The Purloined Letter* is an 'allegory of the signifier', shows throughout this story that the purloined letter *is* the signified, is the story. But Derrida would insist that the signifier cannot be accounted for ('present and correct') as if it were a signified. As a signifier, it must evade such totalization, and remain part of a differential network, resistant, never trapped into final signification. Moreover, perhaps Lacan totalizes the signifier in the story, and totalizes his story as signified, as *the* reading, *the* meaning of *The Purloined Letter*.

In *Seminar on the Purloined Letter* (all quotations from the partial translation in *YFS*, 48) Lacan ends the Seminar with the following:

Thus it is that what the 'purloined letter', say, the 'letter in sufferance' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination'. (1972: 72)

Johnson drily remarks that Lacan is not extolling the virtues of the postal services. What is the point then? Why this final, definite, almost triumphant gesture? Derrida finds two assertions here, neither of which will appear far-fetched to many of the readers of Lacan's *Seminar on the Purloined Letter*.

1. That meaning, the letter, always arrives. This is an extraordinarily logocentric, pre-Derridean semantic theory, and can be accused of naïveté, oversimplification, a crude theory of both communication, and of the power and function of the signifier. Before explaining this, it is necessary to elucidate the implications of this remark – 'a letter always arrives at its destination'. It implies a wholly recoverable text, a transcendental meaning, a support of the now defunct 'affective fallacy', an affirmation of pre-Saussurean semantics, of an idealism concerning meaning and transmission. (It is a pity that Derrida was the only one to take up arms against this remark. American reading theorists, German reception theorists, all modern deconstructors, the ESL group, Bourdieu, the Marxists, feminists, phenomenologists, etc. would all quarrel with the dogmatism and naïveté of this expression of the 'clean window' myth, whereby signifiers act as openings onto reality.)
2. This assertion leads directly to a second one, that of the usefulness, even the sheer successfulness of psychoanalysis. The inference is that the 'meaning' of *The Purloined Letter* is that 'meaning always arrives', and this meaning is revealed, is brought to the surface, is unravelled, by the hero (detective of the piece), psycho-analysis. Psycho-analysis here completes (makes possible) the second story (the meta-story), and acts as an extra-literary Dupin. For Derrida, this is all too simple, too perfect a situation, too much a triumph for psycho-analysis and logocentrism. Coward and Ellis insist that 'the dialectic of desire as it appears in Lacan is in no way comparable to Hegelian idealism' (1977: 108) but Derrida disagrees: Lacan reifies the signifier/letter/phallus, by insisting that it has a proper course (by assuring the necessity of its correct arrival) and that it is indivisible.

The plot of *The Purloined Letter* can act as metaphor for a Derridean assertion. The letter does not reach its destination, but reaches another, then another. Assuming all meaning has an addressee, it is waylaid, misused, hidden, crumpled and re-hidden. In fact, everything happens to it *except* the normal addresser – addressee interaction of traditional poetics.

The events described in the story may be used, or may be forced to enact, metaphorically, Derrida's 'ideas' of deferral, and the breaking of the traditional interpretations of the semiotic code. Simply stated, the letter arrives at many destinations, most of them presumably unintended by the addresser. It moves haphazardly; it becomes the property of different readers (different characters) in the same way that texts become subject to, subordinate to, their readers and readings. The letter gets lost, stolen, hidden, 'misaid' just as, for Derrida, meaning is disseminated, deferred, lost and transformed. The letter is crumpled up, deformed as it were, but can still be read by Dupin. Similarly, each reading mutilates the text to varying extents, and signification becomes utterly unstable, unfixd, subject to change. All one can say is that the letter *was* here, *was* there, and who knows where it is *now*. Similarly, Derrida speaks of anterior presence, of a sense of meaning having been present, but not now. All one can do is plot the course the letter took, follow its spoor, its trace.

Writing for Derrida, entails *differance*, indeterminacy, the echo-chamber, the trace, the chase (but not the catch), expert detection but not solution, the Nietzschean hero who discovers the impossibility of the quest – in short, the dissemination of meaning. For Derrida, Lacan's theory of meaning, of semantic travel, and of psycho-analysis and the phallus, if I may be excused, are too stiff, too much strictly 'to the letter', instead of strictly to the purloined letter:

Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but part of its structure is that it is always capable of not arriving there. (...) Here dissemination threatens the law of the signifier and of castration as a contract of truth. Dissemination mutilates the unity of the signifier, that is, of the phallus. (1975: 66)

Johnson finds in Derrida's attack on Lacan's supposed naiveté a wilful forcing of meaning, an attempt to crowd Lacan into definition, to exact a statement of intent and allegiance, of belief, to commit himself, so that Derrida can then pass sentence. Perhaps Derrida has 'not read correctly' (but he would always agree – the letter is always purloined, the true sentence is always 'passed'), but the spirit of the concluding paragraph of *Seminar on the Purloined Letter* is one of mastery, of control, of solution, of finding the letter, a kind of exultation at having won, whereas Derrida maintains the letter must always be lost.

Lacan insists on the operation (even the centrality here) of the privileged signifier (the phallus) in the story. The central metaphor, the master-meaning, the excavated signifier, for Lacan, is that of the undeniability of the privileged signifier, or the phallus (used here as a symbolic construct because the letter, the phallus, is the property of the Queen). And Derrida's response

is that Lacan sets up psychoanalysis as *the way in which all this is known*. And so, by extension, Lacan becomes the purveyor of truth, a kind of god figure who claims to have all the master-narratives, the word-made-flesh, or the ultimate signifier/phallus. Once again, if I may be excused for bad language, I am sure Derrida would condone this posture by Lacan, as long as he is allowed to use a more colloquial term for Lacan the ultimate signifier/privileged phallus and call him the biggest prick he's ever come across. And this is not very funny because, I suspect, this is what Derrida happens to feel.

I must add that calling Lacan a prick is not original. Considering his subject, his ideas on the phallus, and his often aggressive, condescending, abusive, high-handed attitudes, it is not surprising that he has been called a prick. Jane Gallop (in a fine essay called *The Ladies Man*), makes this comment:

To designate Lacan at his most stimulating and forceful is to call him something more than just phallogocentric. He is also phallo-eccentric. Or, in more pointed language, he is a prick. (1982: 36)

However, if one is championing the dissemination or the fluidity of meaning, then at the very least, one must beware not to have read Lacan's concluding remarks too logocentrically. If meaning is, as Derrida suggests, such an echo-chamber, a series of continual noises, all deferring to each other, then we must guard against any rigid, definite, finite, completed reading of Lacan's remarks. In short, different meanings can occur, can be 'found', which disrupt or curtail Derrida's attack on Lacan. For if Derrida does attempt to 'nail' Lacan, with words, since when were meanings so definite as to have the force of a nail? Lacan's final comment concerning letters always reaching their destination can be read to mean that wherever they, by chance, do arrive, becomes their destination. This is not at all a deterministic statement, reflecting a closed, ordered, neat Lacanian universe, but is instead an assertion which institutionalizes chance and hazard, a statement just as radical as any of Derrida's in this affair. Lacan may be attempting to inform us that *whoever reads becomes the reader*, whoever mutilates the text creates, afresh, the meaning of that text, and that one must stop speaking of *a priori* destinations, or fixed authorial intentions which govern meaning and its dissemination, but submit instead to freeplay, distortion and endless rewriting. In short, perhaps Lacan is here uttering a distinctly Derridean statement and the accusations should be reversed: instead of Lacan insisting on determinate meaning (centres and edges), perhaps Derrida is guilty of just this in the very act of trying to 'nail' Lacan for doing just this. Derrida is caught red-handed, catching Lacan. The reason why is that Derrida makes one of his rare appearances, declaring investigator (himself) and investigated object (Lacan). It would be like person A throwing a stone at person B because he wished to prevent B from throwing stones, when all B was doing was picking his teeth. But here we are left with the scenario of the poor maligned, misjudged, misunderstood Lacan, which is also too good to be true.

Derrida makes a further assault on Lacan's *Seminar on the Purloined Letter* by way of the concept of the Frame. Derrida says:

Within this invisible or neutralized frame, Lacan takes the borderless narration and makes another subdivision, once again leaving aside the frame. He cuts out two dialogues from within the frame of the narration itself, which form the narrated history, i.e. the content of a representation, the internal meaning of a story, the all-enframed which demands our complete attention, mobilizes all the psychoanalytical schemes – Oedipal, as it happens – and draws all the effort of decipherment towards its centre. What is missing here is an elaboration of the problem of the frame, the signature and the *parergon*. This lack allows us to reconstruct the scene of the signifier as a signified (an ever inevitable process in the logic of the sign), writing as the written, the text as discourse or more precisely as an “intersubjective” dialogue (there is nothing fortuitous in the fact that the Seminar discusses only the two dialogues in *The Purloined Letter*). (1975: 52-53)

Lacan is here accused of a number of crimes of omission, the omissions of frames, or contexts. First, the frame of the narrator; secondly of the non-dialogue bits; and thirdly of the trilogy of which *The Purloined Letter* forms a part. In short, Lacan is accused of cutting and simplifying to suit himself, by reducing the entire fictional utterance (which itself is not singular and whole) to two dialogues, or two intersubjective encounters (which most suits Lacan’s psychoanalytic aims). For Derrida, Lacan has overlooked the entire fictionality, the entire narrativity, the presumed generic identity (or the generic expectations which Poe would have assumed in his readers). For Derrida, the two enclosures (the two intersubjective encounters) are not sealed-off occurrences sufficient unto themselves: they constitute only that which is narrated. The tale is the narrator’s tale, and in turn the narrator’s tale, taken as one utterance (and not two encounters) is Poe’s tale.

Not only does Lacan thus mutilate the narrative, ‘change the story’ (or hide the true letter), but he betrays a more important philosophical *modus operandi* of the post-logocentric analyst: Lacan totalizes the frame, and exempts it from both smaller and bigger frames. He declares a unit of size which is designated the ‘real’ unit. This is like an aberrant chemist who decides that the real unit of matter is the molecule (and not the macro-molecule, or organism or large rock on the one hand, and not the atom, electron, proton etc. on the other hand). Once again, he is accused of a naive attitude to experience, in that he wants certainties, absolutes, stable levers with which to move the world his way. Lacan is asserting the possibility of stable epistemologies, of knowledge with foundations which cannot be undermined. He is looking for the philosopher’s stone, the ultimate petrified phallus, a comforting fiction which, for Derrida, makes Lacan no different from the traditional metaphysicians whose knowledge of ‘objects’, contained in learned tomes, have been purloined by the strategy, the sad realizations, of deconstruction.

Of course, this and other instances of ‘trapping’ Lacan, must obey the same rules Derrida is using to trap Lacan. Lacan’s being found guilty, of being the biggest prick as it were, is itself a totalization, a definite conclusion, an *effective* attack on Lacan. Such certainty, such definite reading, is precisely what Lacan is accused of. One might reply that Derrida here exalts himself to the state of the privileged signifier. And here one might find the ultimate

problem in all metaphysics, politics and epistemology: the rebel's toppling of the hegemonic (the king, the definitely known, the so-called essence) constitutes, by its very act, the institution of a new king, a new truth, a new object of knowledge. It is like saying 'Nothing can be known. This is definitely known' or, 'The king is dead, long live the king'. Derrida isolates himself as the ultimately privileged signifier, but must admit that this is the same as being the biggest prick.

This leads to an important diversion from my topic, namely, to a consideration of Derrida's role, in literary studies and in the humanities. A large part of Derrida's skill in writing is to evince the rupture from within hegemonic practices, and not to claim to be beyond them. Derrida repeatedly and vehemently states that by attacking logocentric traditions of writing, he cannot present a thesis – he cannot formulate 'deconstructionism' as a theory, nor can he even set up a provisional, sub-theoretical method or handbook/manual to be used for analysis. *Differance*, the trace, and dissemination replace orthodox versions of meaning, and these terms explicitly lack coherence, centrality, meaning or significance. They are imposters, but very effectively destructive ones. The whole of Derrida's corpus is a *response* (to Western metaphysics), and not a new master narrative, a new Freud or Marx. Derrida never wishes to claim more. At present, there is a move away from Derrida, a dissatisfaction, often a cynicism, most often within literary studies. Sadly however, those who most often champion this new 'undermining' of Derrida do so by way of attacking the practice of deconstructive criticism. A horde of deconstructors implies a following, something to follow, a rudimentary method. Apparently, a 'deconstructive analysis' of X, of Y, is now possible, like an alternative to a 'straight' reading. But these readings are not written by Derrida. They are already (always) inscribed within institutional discourse, within hegemonic epistemologies. An attack on deconstruction is not the same as an attack on Derrida; Derrida is far too careful not to turn his own manoeuvres into a presence. Derrida's function has been to disabuse a tradition of its misconceptions, its false hopes and its blindness. It is sad that an over-enthusiastic desire to escape the confines of traditional reading practices might have caused an injudicious, wholesale plundering of Derrida's texts for a method. It is even sadder that those who wish to condemn Derrida for the excesses of some of his followers are often those who reveal an embarrassingly scant knowledge of Derrida's texts.

In this sense Derrida cannot be called the biggest prick because he took the knife to himself, dismembering himself. His role is not usurpation, but the role of the eunuch close to the king, the jester at the king's court. His presence is not official. He is 'not seen' (as a 'servant' of the king, as an 'unserious jester'); he is invisible, part of the surroundings, still within traditional logocentric discourse, trying to cause tremors from within, or trying to prompt the tremors to cause themselves.

Well, if Derrida cannot top Lacan, or show him up without showing himself up, abusing him but slipping away, knifing him but having a strong alibi ('it was not me officer. Lacan is a bad man, got his just deserts, but I was not

present'), then perhaps he is not innocent, but devilishly clever, the most slippery fish.

However, to return, Derrida opens *The Purveyor of Truth* with a clear statement, a clear attack:

Let us suppose there is psychoanalysis. When you think that you have got it, it is – to be supposed – that psychoanalysis evidences itself. (1975: 51)

Here Derrida is attempting to reveal the fatal flaw of psychoanalysis, the flaw that exists in Descartes' cogito. In the utterance 'I think, therefore I am', the 'I' is presupposed before it is proved (by the 'therefore') and so, not only is the syllogism rendered false, (or, in other words, the 'self' is not proved) the very idea of the 'self' (in the statement) is what leads one to the evidence that it exists. In short, the 'I' is invented, then is shown (falsely) to have always existed. Similarly, Derrida attempts to show that psychoanalysis finds itself. In whatever it confronts, it finds only its own reflection, thus reinforcing the sense of its own existence while seeing nothing.

All knowledge systems, all ideologies, perform this function: they first and foremost preserve themselves, like governments. And this is precisely what Derrida is attacking, in accordance with the whole project of grammatology: hegemonic discourse, power preserving itself, the word made flesh, psychoanalysis as the key to experience. Sometimes Derrida is just plain angry at Lacan the logocentric phallograt, the purveyor of truth, for setting himself up (which, Derrida tries to show, is 'sending himself up') and *The Purloined Letter* is the occasion for the confrontation. By pointing repeatedly to Lacan's misreading of *The Purloined Letter* or his mutilation of the text, Derrida is more concerned to reveal the coercive, domineering tendencies of Lacan's frame of reference or point of view (that of psychoanalysis) than to protect the so-called autonomy of meaning in *The Purloined Letter*. Further, for Derrida, the letter is a perfect example of logocentric discourse: it is addressed, signed and clearly directed. Identity (of the addresser, addressee and the addressed letter) is confirmed, unquestionable, substantial. Poe's letter, and Lacan's use of Poe's letter, are excellent examples of logocentric behaviour. And yet, the more angry Derrida becomes in *The Purveyor of Truth*, the more he betrays himself. By this I mean that the more Derrida 'proves' Lacan's guilt, the more he undermines his attack on the idea of a master-narrative (which is the authorizing code, the medium of proof.) In other words, if Lacan is guilty so is Derrida. Nevertheless, not even this statement (my statement) is absolute, for there is a seepage of meaning, a residue, a result not accounted for in the equation, the remainder that Derrida tells us always to look for in leaking signifiers. Here I refer to the 'knowledge' the reader has of both Derrida and Lacan from these essays, glimpses of authorial beings (which is of course absurd – even if the father-author existed, he could not be perceived in the work).

Before closing, I wish to plunder a paragraph from one of Derrida's most extraordinary and competent commentators, Gayatri Spivak. In a discussion

of *La Carte Postale* and of Gregory Ulmer's response to it, Spivak has this to say:

History is seen here as a series of chain letters written on postcards. This is a version of saying that "truth" is a chain of substitutions, or history a series of displacements within a restrained economy (a lopsided binary system not producing sublated third terms), or the concept (of the) metaphor (and vice versa) is an autobus or a boat that cannot be stopped (Derrida, 1978: 7). The chain is constituted by the possibility of non-arrival, first because the idea of arrival cannot otherwise emerge, and secondly (and more "radically") because all arrivals are irreducibly askew. Such a chain of substitutions and displacements (of senders-receivers-messages and so on) takes place because the origin and the end of anything, be they only of an "act" of signification, or of the theory and practice of revolution, cannot be identical. If origin and end were or could be identical, as idealists or sociopolitical engineers of all types believe (allowing for calculable compensations falls within his belief), there would be no chink out of which history could emerge. History is the difference between origin (*archè*) and end (*telos*), each the postponement and holding-in-reserve of the idealized other. (1984: 28)

Before discussing this quotation, I must remind the reader that *The Purveyor of Truth* is reprinted (with minor additions) in *La Carte Postale* and is integral to it: Spivak's comments are directed at this presentation of both the earlier and the later Derrida. Spivak moves from Derrida's taking of Lacan to task concerning signification to all chains, all beginnings and ends (senders and receivers), firsts and lasts, aims and conclusions, hopes and results – in short, the endless oppositions which, failing to grasp each other's hand (bridge the gap), create spillage, a spillage called history. One is reminded here of Yeats's declaration:

The stallion Eternity
 Mounted the mare of Time
 'Gat the foal of the world.

Spivak assembles the various hints, almost-stated meanings, almost seen wholes (or theories) and re-opens Derrida's comments on Lacan and Poe onto an enormous field, the whole of signification, the whole of history (and historians), the whole of meaning. The 'chink' (as Spivak describes it) not only irrevocably complicates all signification, all narratives, (and all master-narratives), but also thereby enriches, inseminates (like Yeats's stallion), creates new vistas as it breaks the rigid, totalized master narratives of logocentric thinkers. And this is the chink which Derrida finds in Poe's tale of a letter which perversely leaves many chinks in the idealized sender-receiver paradigm of the idealists, in fact, all those who believe in the indivisibility, integrity and proper course taken by, the letter, the message, the intention, the desire or the plan.

Finally, the contents of the purloined letter are never known outside of the fictive creations of the story. One is led into wondering what the letter might have contained. What if a typescript is discovered, an addition to the story,

told by the narrator, explaining that the letter was from a fellow called E.A. Poe, who sent a short story to the Queen called *The Purloined Letter*? This is an obtuse kind of conjecture, looking for trouble, but consider the implications: Poe would be the narrator, subordinate to Poe who is the author, and Poe is the character revealed in a letter written by Poe in a story narrated by Poe in a story written by Poe and so on, like a hall of mirrors, with no originary utterance, no source, an endless deferral of authority or true meaning.

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